

Evolution of theft

The face of identity theft is changing; learn how to fight it

BY GREG PHILLIPS
gphillips@dothaneagle.com

Back in the day, identity theft wasn't that much of a concern.

According to the Federal Trade Commission, there were only 86,250 reported cases of identity theft in 2001.

In 2014, that number hit 332,646, an indicator of the many ways technology has made life easier for criminals looking to take what isn't theirs.

Scams and mail fraud have existed for years, but new forms of identity theft have risen and made things difficult on police and, especially, victims.

Just last month, Dothan police discovered several "skimmers" — devices implanted, either externally or internally, on card readers at gas pumps — at four gas stations throughout Dothan.

Dothan police Investigator Erik Broten said a suspect still hasn't been identified, and the DPD is now working with agencies in Florida and Georgia that have faced similar issues.

will be easy to prosecute," Broten said. "It's just a matter of trying to find a suspect and compare our cases with other agencies to see what they've come up with and see if it matches ours."

Dothan police Investigator Shane Ash is passionate about spreading information regarding identity theft because he has been a victim of it.

Ash related one story of getting a call from an agency claiming he had won a vacation.

The caller had his name and date of birth, and Ash pressed to find out how.

As it turned out, his family member had signed him up for a sweepstakes at a mall in Louisiana.

Ash said it's indicative of just how little control you have over what is done with your personal information — name, date of birth, Social Security number — once it is given out.

"It is embarrassing, and you don't want to tell people," Ash said. "But it's important for you to file the police report and get it out there. Tell all your friends and neighbors, because you don't want them to fall

See **THEFT**, Page 3A

Theft

From Page 1A

victim. The better we do that, that gets it out there so people when they do get that phone call, they say no. No one from the Florida Lottery is going to call me and tell me I won the lottery; I've got to go to them."

Skimmers usually lead to criminals selling victims' credit card numbers.

"Anywhere where a criminal can access something easily and put the skimmer on the internal or external side," Ash said. "Usually they're not using it; they're selling it, usually to a foreigner, and the foreigner sells it. I've been a victim myself."

It's also a crime that is becoming easier to perpetrate.

"You can go to any store and buy a card reader, which is a skimmer in a sense," Ash said. "Someone can place a skimmer somewhere, go away for a month and all those transactions and credit card numbers are in there. Some skimmers are smart, with Bluetooth. (If) I'm a bad guy and it's sending me the information and I'm downloading it, saving it and selling it."

telemarketing and online scams.

Ash said these often target senior citizens but can affect anyone.

"Anything that's too good to be true, it usually is," he said. "People will call and say you won the lottery and need to pay taxes on it. People will say you won a car, need to pay taxes. They might have some sort of shipping fees. People will say they work for the IRS. The IRS does not call you, they send you a letter. Do not respond to these scams."

Ash said Craigslist is also a concern.

He said if you try to purchase something online and the seller asks you to send the money via

Western Union before sending you the item, it's a red flag.

He said if you can't buy the item in a public place or can't drive to pick it up personally, it is best to use a service that allows users to see the seller's transaction history and customer rating, such as eBay.

Ash said residents can protect themselves by being vigilant and aware of potential scams and scamming technology, including computer viruses.

He encourages all area residents to utilize www.annualcreditreport.com to receive free credit reports from the three major credit agencies.

The Dothan Police Department also regularly presents classes on identity theft.

If a business or individual would like to schedule a class, contact Cpl. Susie Peters at 615-3647.